



SENATOR

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E-Newsletter - 27th District, Tacoma

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Dear Neighbors,

I write you three days into the short, 60-day session. After opening ceremonies, my fellow lawmakers and I got right to work with a slate of committees meetings to address the overpowering theme of this session, the budget shortfall.

The Legislature's primary task this year is to rewrite the two-year budget it approved last year to plug the \$2.6 billion hole ripped open by the economic downturn. This will require many more very difficult decisions about what the state can afford and how the state spends its money. As many of you are aware, there is simply not enough money to sustain our current amount of programs. Washington isn't alone. These same decisions are being made in at least three dozen statehouses across the country this year as the depressed economy has bathed the landscape in a sea of red.

The Governor gave her [state of the state address to the Legislature](#) on Tuesday releasing her second budget proposal. In a follow up presentation in the Ways & Means Committee she gave more detail suggesting to buy back \$779 million in programs and services from the all-cuts proposal she rolled out in December as required by law. Her new proposal assumes \$105 million in new revenue plus hundreds of millions in federal funding. She acknowledged there's great uncertainty about what federal funding might be available. Along with new revenues, there will still be a need to reduce services and programs in order to develop a balanced budget.

But the budget won't be the only item on the Legislature's agenda in 2010. An array of other bills addressing the economy, the environment, education and other key issues also will be considered over the next two months.

These continue to be very difficult times for people of all different walks of life. I promise to continue to work as hard as I can with my fellow lawmakers to determine the best possible budget solution.

As always I welcome your thoughts and wish you the very best.

Sincerely,

Debbie Regala

A brutal year for Washingtonians

I suspect many of us and our friends, neighbors, and family members will look back at 2009 as one of the toughest years of our lives. And 2010 may not be a lot better. However, the Department of Revenue director tells me that revenues are slightly above estimates for the past two months. So I believe we should see our economy and employment begin to recover by the end of the year. The global recession that has pummeled our country along with nations around the world has hit hard in Washington state as well, even if not as hard as in some states.

By Dec. 31, about 475,000 Washingtonians will have received unemployment benefits in 2009, compared to 290,000 in 2008. The Employment Security Department paid out nearly \$4 billion in unemployment benefits in 2009, compared to \$1.2 billion in 2008 and \$725 million in 2007. In March, the number of unemployed workers in Washington reached an all-time high. That's a lot of hurt.

To help people across Washington, Employment Security more than doubled the size of its unemployment-claims staff since the recession began. On top of that, employees at the unemployment call centers worked about 65,000 hours of overtime last year to handle the increased case load.

At the same time, our state's strong unemployment system allowed us to keep up with the needs of all those people who lost jobs. At a time when many other states had to raise taxes to make up for bankrupt unemployment insurance funds, we had the our lowest unemployment-insurance tax rates in 40 years, with an average rate of 1.55 percent, and were able to extend benefits past the normal durations.

Out-of-work Washingtonians also benefited from WorkSource, a statewide partnership of Employment Security and other state government, local government and nonprofit agencies that provide a comprehensive array of employment and training services to job seekers and employers. According to a study by Employment Security economists, unemployed workers who used WorkSource job-search services found jobs faster and, as a result, earned more money than those who didn't seek WorkSource assistance. In fact, those who used WorkSource were as much as 37 percent more likely to find work within the review period than those who didn't, and were on pace to earn \$2,500 to \$3,000 more per year.

One last bit of good news: Employment Security has added a telephone service that gives people the option of being called back instead of waiting on hold, without losing their place in line. If an unemployed worker calls the unemployment telecenter to file a claim and the wait time is more than a few minutes, the phone system informs the caller asks if the caller would like to be called back, requests the caller's name and phone number, and provides an estimate of when the call will be returned. When the caller approaches the top of the queue, the call-back is made.

To fastest service, people should call later in the week to avoid peak call times. For new applications, Thursday and Friday mornings are the least busy times in the call centers. The best time to file weekly claims via the automated phone system is Tuesday through Thursday after 5 p.m.

Use of food stamps climbs 60 percent

In what amounts to another sign of the times, the Seattle Times [reported this week](#) that the use of food stamps in Washington has climbed by 60 percent — twice the national average.

More than 850,000 Washington residents were using food stamps in October. That's almost 13 percent of the entire population.

The news underscores the importance in upcoming budget deliberations of maintaining a safety net that will lend a helping hand to the most vulnerable among us.